

CAN NONVIOLENCE “SUCCEED” IN IRAQ?

Chelsea Collonge

The challenge is to speak out, rise up, and act against the unilateral American display of unbridled military power, as well as against acts of violence by some Iraqis toward that same American might..... This double critique arises out of the Qur'anic view that to save the life of one human being—any human being—is to have saved the life of all humanity, and to take the life of a single human being, any human being, is as if to destroy all of humanity [Qur'an 5:32].

—Omid Safi, from *Twilight of Empire*

What good is nonviolence in a situation of aching, complex violence backed by a country with crushing power at its disposal? As a peacemaker, I have come to terms with the fact that nonviolence may not be able to correct and heal the situation in Iraq—even with a sustained effort, it might not “succeed.” However, in the long run, nonviolence always works to foster conditions for peace. Violence never does, and its short-term “success” is also uncertain.

Whether embodied or simply used, nonviolence is a potent form of resistance that uses power other than that of military force. This includes the power of getting in the way, of making a situation ungovernable for an oppressor, as well as the power of rehumanizing a situation, offering dignity, and winning allies.

Advocating nonviolence is different from condemning those who choose to use violence in situations of extreme injustice. I cannot support the resistance as long as elements of it kill and maim people, because to me being antiwar is about protecting human life. But my job as an American is to tell my government—not the Iraqi people—what to do. As Martin Luther King Jr., said: “I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today, my own government.”

What I *can* do is point out the *potential* of nonviolent resistance. Nonviolent Civilian Based Defense was effective in Czechoslovakia during the “Prague Spring” uprising of 1968 against occupying Soviets, and it involves the withdrawal of economic and social cooperation by the people. Nonviolent protests have happened all over Iraq since the occupation began; this April, a huge demonstration called by Moqtada al-Sadr demanded an end to occupation and a speedy trial for Saddam. More so than the insurgency, these demonstrations send a clear message that is more likely to be heard as moral and legitimate. Another nonviolent episode happened last August, when Iraqis in Najaf succeeded in protecting the Shrine of Ali through nonviolent interposition, allowing both Iraqi militias and US soldiers to back off with dignity.

Iraqis may feel that they don't have the choice to be non-

violent, because US soldiers will respond violently—but US soldiers crack down on violent resistance as well. One of the strengths of nonviolence is that it makes an armed power less powerful by provoking an obviously illegitimate use of force, thus eliciting outside support and pressure. The insurgency, on the other hand, provides a seductive excuse for US troops to remain in Iraq—“to prevent chaos.”

An additional benefit of nonviolence is the way it can involve and empower a wider segment of the Iraqi population, including women and children. This is important because revolutions carry the seed of future government—one that may not be respectful of the rights of all people.

There are also many foreigners doing nonviolent intervention in Iraq. Before the war started, Voices in the Wilderness—a Chicago-based group that is facing massive fines for smuggling humanitarian supplies into Iraq during the economic sanctions—was part of 500+ people who acted as “human shields.” They camped out at water treatment facilities and hospitals as the war started, to draw attention to America's illegal bombing tactics and to stand in solidarity with their Iraqi friends. UK Human Shields was swamped with upwards of 10,000 applications to process, even though American shields were expecting up to 12 years in prison and thousands of dollars in fines.

Christian Peacemaker Teams are still in Iraq, monitoring conflict situations, documenting human rights abuses, and advocating on behalf of detainees. Like the Code Pink delegations and American Friends Service Committee correspondents, they serve as an important link between Americans and Iraqis, humanizing each side to the other. Along with the few humanitarian aid workers and NGOs that remain in Iraq, they are accepting suffering and danger to send a message that their lives are no more valuable than the lives of Iraqis. Some have died, like Marla Ruzicka, a 28-year-old Californian who founded an organization to count and assist civilian casualties of war (CIVIC) and was killed in a suicide bombing several weeks ago.

Nonviolence is also a powerful tool in the hands of Americans who want to end their country's occupation of Iraq. Domestic civil disobedience and direct action have long been important elements of antiwar movements. Principled nonviolence, with its focus on non-alienating communication and respectful dialogue with opponents, is also crucial for reaching out to the broad base of Americans who, if feeling safe enough to open their minds to new knowledge, can be persuaded to oppose the war.

Finally, nonviolence is crucial to all struggles against war and imperialism because of its powerful, consistent, and nonpartisan argument against militarism, as well as its focus on demonstrating a new vision in the world. With its emphasis on just means, nonviolence dissolves the logic of destroying a nation in order to save it (read: “delivering” democracy to Iraq).

(continued on pg. 30)

COULD NONVIOLENCE “SUCCEED” IN IRAQ (FROM P. 23)

The spirituality of nonviolence—that all humans are interconnected and that their lives are of equal worth—is a powerful force for peace. Marla Ruzicka, upon leaving her work in post-Sept. 11th Afghanistan, wrote, “My heart broke and I made a commitment to ensure that no more innocent Afghans had to suffer.” What if all Americans made that kind of commitment?

Besides the organizations above, check out www.globalexchange.org/countries/mideast/iraq/links for more info on Iraq.